

Conservative parties routed in another Australian election

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Australia's two conservative parties have been dealt a second crushing electoral blow in as many weeks. Last Saturday, the state Labor government in Queensland swept back into office on a wave of voter resentment towards the Howard federal government and its pro-market policies, leaving the state Liberals and Nationals reduced to little more than a parliamentary rump.

While the extent of the conservative rout has, once again, provoked shock and disbelief within official circles, and panic within the Howard government, the Queensland vote continues a trend that has been developing for five years. Since Prime Minister Howard's federal Liberal-National Coalition won office in 1996, defeating Labor in a landslide, four state Coalition governments have been tossed out, with the conservative vote plunging to historic lows.

In 1998, Labor won the previous Queensland election by the narrowest of margins. Last weekend it went to the polls sullied by a corruption scandal and bereft of a parliamentary majority, following several expulsions and resignations. Nevertheless, the party registered one of the largest swings to Labor in history—around nine percent across the state, taking its primary vote from a near-record low of 38.8 percent in 1998 to 47.9 percent. The victory, on top of Labor's resounding defeat of the Court Coalition government in Western Australia the week before, underscores the fact that the dominant voter sentiment is not against incumbency *per se*, but against the big business, economic rationalist policies that are most closely associated with the Coalition. The result spells almost certain electoral disaster for the Howard government, which is obliged to go to the polls before the end of this year.

The rural-based National Party received a drubbing across its traditional heartland, losing at least 11 of its 23 seats to Labor. In an historic about-turn, Labor won 42 percent of the primary country vote, twice that of the Nationals. Farmers and regional small business people, formerly staunch National voters, vented their anger at the Howard government's deregulation of the dairy industry, its recently-introduced Goods and Services Tax (GST), its fuel excise, the privatisation of the telecommunications giant, Telstra, the decimation of services in country towns, including banks, post offices, public schools and hospitals and Depression-level provincial unemployment.

Competing directly with the National Party for the rural vote, the ultra-right One Nation Party allocated its preferences away from sitting members, unless they agreed to a preference deal. National

Party leader Rob Borbidge refused the deal, but at least 17 National MPs defied him. The outfit's preferences helped several Nationals over the line. The Nationals preferences, in turn, assisted One Nation in taking three seats, as compared with 11 in the 1998 election. One Nation's off-shoot, the City Country Alliance, formed last year by dissenting One Nation MPs, lost all its seats. Two former One Nation MPs were elected as Independents.

In the metropolitan centres, Labor gained five of the urban-based Liberal party's eight seats, some of them for the first time, leaving just three Liberal MPs in the state parliament. It even won two of the most affluent and exclusive Brisbane electorates, Indooroopilly and Clayfield.

One of the reasons was disgust among middle and upper middle class voters at the Nationals' manoeuvres with the racist and xenophobic One Nation. More fundamentally, Labor has been attracting a growing constituency among the wealthy. Labor Premier Peter Beattie received public endorsement from Rupert Murdoch's media empire, and business generally favoured a Labor victory. With the Coalition wracked by deep internal divisions, and on the brink of collapse, the ALP is currently viewed by corporate Australia as a more stable and reliable alternative.

One Nation

The swing to Labor in working class areas was largely at the expense of One Nation. In 1998, Hanson's organisation won 23 percent of the vote statewide, gaining six seats from Labor and five from the Coalition. This time, standing in only half as many seats, One Nation attracted 8.5 percent of the overall vote, ceding five of its former Labor seats and two former Coalition seats to Labor. Its average vote in the seats it contested was 20.7 percent, compared with 26.7 in 1998.

As the *Australian's* chief political commentator Paul Kelly put it, there was “a structural change in the Hanson vote. It now constitutes a near complete defection from the National Party whereas at the 1998 election about a third of it came from Labor.

“The Nationals lost to Labor on the left, and One Nation on the right.”

The rejection of the major parties in favour of minor parties and Independents—a tendency that has been growing in every election during the past two decades—remained a significant factor. Some 25 percent of the electorate, the same ratio as in 1998, voted against Labor and the coalition parties. The Greens averaged seven percent in the 31 seats they contested, nearly double their vote at the last state election, and Independent candidates won 11 percent

statewide. By contrast, the Democrats' vote collapsed, from 1.6 to 0.3, further proof of the damage done by its GST deal with the Howard government.

Despite winning less than half the vote, Labor will probably hold (counting is not yet complete) 67 seats in the 89-seat parliament, or 75 percent of the total. The Liberals, Nationals and One Nation, with a combined vote of 36 percent, will take 16 seats, or 18 percent of the total.

The skewed result reflects the success of Beattie's campaign policy of calling on voters to "just vote one"—that is, register a vote for a preferred candidate and refuse to allocate any further preferences. (This is allowed under Queensland's optional preferential voting system, introduced in the early 1990s, unlike the federal system, where it is compulsory to allocate preferences.)

Aimed specifically at exploiting the growing schism within the coalition, the policy won the support of up to 70 percent of voters in key electorates. Coalition candidates who failed to win the most primary votes, could not, therefore, boost their totals through the usual preference deals.

In Charters Towers, for example, a former National seat, Labor received 44.6 percent of the vote against the *combined* National/One Nation vote of 55.3 percent. Labor won the seat, however, due to One Nation's decision to place sitting MPs last, and the decision of numbers of voters not to allocate preferences at all.

Global economic processes

In an effort to minimise its implications for the upcoming federal election, Liberal leader Howard and National leader John Anderson have put the anti-conservative swing down to "local" issues.

"It would just be departing from all reason and logic to pretend that the main reason the Coalition was routed in Queensland on Saturday was federal issues. It wasn't," the Prime Minister declared last Monday.

But Howard's argument is based on a completely arbitrary separation between global, national and local issues. The major concerns of ordinary working people, whether in rural or urban areas, certainly present themselves as "local": the lack of decent-paying jobs, the deterioration of public schools and hospitals, bank closures, the GST, high fuel prices—in short, growing social distress and uncertainty. However these problems are ever more directly the outcome of global processes within world capitalist economy.

Corporations slash jobs and banks close branches to lift productivity, shore up their bottom line and remain "internationally competitive." Global capital demands the slashing of national regulatory barriers to investment and profits, on pain of moving offshore, leaving small farmers and business people facing ruin. To the extent that it has one, the role of national government is to facilitate these processes, eliminating any obstacles to the amassing of corporate wealth.

Since 1996 the Howard government has wound back the welfare state and drastically cut government spending to reduce the public drain on private profit. Corporate taxes are being lowered while the GST places the taxation burden squarely on the shoulders of the working class.

The escalating electoral volatility is just one expression of the growing antagonism between the masses of ordinary people and the privileged elite; between the needs and aspirations of ordinary working people and the requirements of the profit system.

Pointing to this fact, the *Sydney Morning Herald* editorialised after the Queensland result: "The sullen disenchantment within the electorate is directed at big issues—globalisation, privatisation, rationalisation of services, the supremacy of market forces, job insecurity—that are perceived to be largely in the domain of national government. Mr Howard rightly argues as Keating [former Labor Prime Minister] did that economic reform is vital if Australia is to compete and prosper internationally, but this month's elections suggest the message is still falling on deaf ears..."

The Prime Minister, the editorial continued, had to "project a more humane image of government without destroying his claim to economic competence."

In other words, the government's task is to square the circle: to win an electoral constituency for policies that are entirely incompatible with the interests of the majority of the population.

Howard has spent the past 12 months trying to do just that: conducting "listening tours" to discover the causes of voter discontent; initiating various "pork barrelling" schemes in regional areas—a new rail line or some local road repairs. But all to no avail.

Summing up his party's debacle Queensland National leader Borbidge lamented: "It's almost as if it doesn't matter what we say, it doesn't matter what we do. People feel so angry, they feel so disconnected from the political process that they've decided that you know that doesn't matter—they want the mainstream political parties certainly on the conservative side to really continue to cop a belting."

But the violent swings in the electoral pendulum have implications that go far beyond the fortunes of the two major parties. Class tensions in Australia are deepening, as the social divide between the vast majority and a wealthy minority widens. These will inevitably lead to mounting social unrest, because neither party can offer any solution to the social and economic crisis facing millions of ordinary people.

Registering protest votes against the major parties provides no way forward. The working class, as it becomes increasingly alienated from the entire political establishment and moves into struggle against it, needs to develop its own political party based on a genuine alternative—a socialist perspective that challenges the very foundations of the profit system itself.



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